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A. R. Lawrence, *OfficeUS Agenda*, Zürich: Lars  
Müller Publishers, 2014 & E. Franch i Gilabert,  
A. Miljački, A. Schafer, M. Kubo, *OfficeUS Atlas*,  
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The American contribution to the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014, entitled *OfficeUS*, looked into the immense built production of American architects abroad. Comprising a huge amount of historical material on the one hand and an occasional operating architecture office on the other, the contribution aims at redefining the boundaries of today's internationally operating architecture firms while sifting through their history. During the Biennale the compiled information was used to formulate certain arguments about the history (and future) of American architecture abroad. Yet the bold curatorial decision to present the repository at the Biennale free of almost any analysis encouraged visitors to come up with their own readings and links. The two publications reviewed here—*OfficeUS Agenda* and *OfficeUS Atlas*—can be seen as critical positions vis-à-vis the huge amount of information presented at the exhibition, which they thus complement in a crucial manner.<sup>1</sup>

The first publication, entitled *OfficeUS Agenda*, can be considered the main catalogue accompanying the exhibition. Going beyond the descriptive character of a traditional exhibition catalogue, *Agenda* sets out to reveal the hidden patterns that connect the different

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1 The two books on review are part of a series of four publications accompanying the exhibition. The other two are, respectively, *OfficeUS Manual* and *OfficeUS New World*. According to the authors' website, *OfficeUS Manual* is a compilation of "the protocols and strategies of the architecture office to form a working manual for OfficeUS. From business models to time-sheets, the manual examines the conventions that structure practice to transform the way we think about architectural offices." It is "understood as a living document [...] published in digital form with limited copies at the opening and continuously edited with input by OfficeUS Principals throughout the duration of the Biennale." The final version, however, is still forthcoming. The last of the four planned publications, also still to be published, is *OfficeUS New World* (Working Title) that aims to document "the work, conversations and intelligence developed by the fellows and the visitors throughout the biennale".

200 | firms and projects “on display.” In a part called “Sections Through OfficeUS,” different scholarly texts provide a critical analysis of the firms and projects presented. By grouping and examining the firms in various constellations, “intellectual threads” come to the fore, each revealing different (though often overlapping), overarching themes that complement the chronological structure of the exhibition (*Agenda*, p. 23). These thematic slices of the history of American architecture abroad are themselves further explored in one of the three main chapters of the book: “Expertise,” “Exchange” and “Export.”

Michael Kubo’s contribution to the section “Expertise” immediately reveals what is at stake in this chapter and, by extension, also hints at the goal of the entire book and the *OfficeUS* project. Drawing on the division formulated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock in his seminal 1947 article “The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius,” Kubo argues that the professionalization of the field is perhaps the major American contribution to the architectural discipline. Indeed, central to the chapter “Expertise” is a reflection on the shifting modes of the environment in which architectural designs and projects are produced—from the architectural genius’s studio to industrialized mega-firms to the post-industrial “office,” where the efficiency of the free plan is exchanged for the multi-layered boudoir—and how these impact architectural production and idioms.

The second chapter, entitled “Exchange,” compiles contributions dealing with the “multidirectional movement of architectural ideas, techniques and materials as a reciprocal, though not necessarily equal, relationship” (*Agenda*, p. 24.) Besides bringing underexposed figures into view, the various contributions in this chapter emphasize how particular forms of management often appear to be a decisive factor in the exchange of architectural ideas. Ivan Rupnik, for instance, shows how Taylorism traveled to Europe as a management idea, then was appropriated and adjusted by European thinkers and picked up by European architects who used these different ideas on efficiency and standardization to substantiate their own formal interpretation: the machine aesthetic. Keller Easterling focuses on the bureaucratic dimension of the profession, showing how international organizations and the norms they establish have been a significant factor in the architectural production of our age.

The last chapter, “Export,” has a similar premise as “Exchange,” and yet, as its title suggests, it turns the “multidirectional movement” into a unidirectional movement from the United States to the rest of the world. Contributors to this chapter define “American architecture” by looking into particular bureaucratic or capitalist typologies, from the embassy as the embodiment of an international political agenda to Hilton hotels as enclaves of the American lifestyle abroad to the international exhibition program of the US Information Agency as a battleground for the diverging ideologies of communism and capitalism.

The second publication, *OfficeUS Atlas*, has a different status. Instead of an exhibition catalogue that provides an in-depth and multilayered reading of the exhibits on show, the Atlas can be seen as an exhibition on paper, described by the editors as a “curatorial book-object.” Overlapping with the ambition of the exhibition, this volume is conceived as a chronological repository of American firms and projects abroad, combined with a series

of critical sections (“historical narratives”) (p. 13). The intersection of the “archive” with historical narratives results in a twofold configuration of the book.

The “Repository,” introducing in a chronological order no fewer than 169 American architecture firms, contains a “filing card” for each of them, with a description of their way of working abroad, as well as extra information on the organizational structure, logo, founding partners, location of the headquarters, etc. In addition to these “filing cards,” the section also includes lists of projects, enumerating the project name, date and location.

The second part, however, lifts the book to a level beyond a mere catalogue of firms. The repository is (literally) intersected by twenty-one “Historical Narratives” situated roughly within their time frame in the chronological filing of firms and projects. Each of these narratives consists of a two-page text, followed by infographics (revealing how certain narratives actually came to light through analyzing the big data assembled on the firms and their projects) and facsimiles of important historical articles or archival documents substantiating the text’s argument. These facsimiles were also central to the exhibition in Venice. While the bulk of the material hints at the importance of the activities of US architectural firms abroad, the facsimiles (or rather the facsimile-like reproductions, since the original format is not respected) not only provide the reader with a glimpse of the available source material, but also illustrate the development of architectural representation over time. As such, the facsimiles and infographics provide a set of (historical) documents that sustain the plausibility and indicate the *Zeitgeist* of the narratives.

Unlike the different contributions in *OfficeUS Agenda*, the short narratives should not be understood as scholarly texts in and of themselves. Rather, they serve as an invitation to develop research that goes beyond conventional architectural history, characterized by an obsession with issues of form and a still widespread focus on architectural “genius.” The series of narratives opens with a brief discussion entitled “The Gentleman and the Architect,” which addresses the formation of professional practice in the nineteenth century and, as such, refers to the first chapter of *OfficeUS Agenda*. Somewhat later in the Atlas, “Incorporating Architecture” reveals how architectural practice became a corporate business from the 1940s onwards, with the example of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) as the perfect embodiment of these new firms. Following the general lines of American cultural, economic and political history, the series of narratives does not focus solely on changes in architectural practice. It also brings to the fore new actors and concepts that shaped the built world throughout the twentieth century and focuses attention on the bureaucratic rather than the genius dimension of the profession.

Ranging from American imperial aspirations to the communist threat during the cold war to the oil crisis and even recent developments in Asia, different authors touch upon the shifting international agenda of the United States. Concerning imperial politics, for example, Thomas Hines discusses how the City Beautiful movement was used as a tool through “which the more ‘advanced’ Americans could help effect a ‘progressive civilization’ by instruction and example.” (*Atlas*, p. 86–87). In the post-war politics of the United States, with the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the emerging cold war, the promotion

202 | of an American lifestyle was an important factor in persuading countries to embrace the American cause. Through the construction of hotels for globally operating hotel chains, little exponents of an American lifestyle were popping up around the globe (*Atlas*, p. 426–427). Another narrative focuses on architectural production in the wake of political and economic developments within oil-producing countries, demonstrating how political relations between the United States and OPEC-countries before, during and after the oil crisis of the 1970s had an impact on the many American architecture firms working within these contexts (*Atlas*, p. 750–751).

Both publications, the first a critical textbook accompanying the repository on display at the Venice Biennale (*Agenda*) and the second a selection of this same repository and a suggestion of possible critical approaches to this mass of information (*Atlas*), start from the same, extensive database of architectural firms and projects that was compiled by the project's initiators. The *Atlas*, in particular, makes an impression through its sheer size. Although the editors explicitly claim that it was never their intention to produce an exhaustive encyclopedia on US architectural firms working abroad, the mass of information compiled does give a sense of the importance and scale of the phenomenon. US architectural firms were truly operating on a global scale. The Achilles heel of the project, however, is precisely the selection of the projects and firms presented. Claiming that the historical narratives and critical agenda texts arose in an almost self-evident way out of the “big data” gathered on the topic, the project editors remain vague on the conditions underlying this process of collecting, stating only that the project is “based on pressing historical and contemporary questions” and seeks “to resonate with the historical narratives.” This raises the question of whether projects may have been chosen to substantiate a priori defined narratives instead of the other way around (*Atlas*, p. 10). Were firms left out and, if so, what kind of narratives would these have “resonated with”? For example, when looking at the mapping of selected projects, one cannot but be struck by the blank space located on the African continent. From surveys on modern architecture in Africa produced by the German scholar Udo Kultermann in the 1960s, we know for a fact that a number of American architects were active in Africa, including Kenneth Scott and Harry Weese, to name only two. Given the recent interest among architectural historians in documenting and studying twentieth-century architectural production on the African continent, the almost complete absence of projects in Africa in the *OfficeUS* project is somewhat puzzling. Why did the editors not address this absence—as well as that in some other geographical contexts? Was it not possible to develop a compelling historical narrative addressing the shifting interests of the United States in colonial/postcolonial Africa in order to at least open up the topic for future scholarly work?

That said, the editors of the *OfficeUS* project should be commended for having “opened doors to further investigation” (*Atlas*, p. 13) in a manner that has relevance well beyond the particular case of the United States. By shifting the focus away from the well-trodden paths of style and form towards an in-depth investigation of the different actors and forces that have truly defined the built world and the bureaucratic dimension underlying the

architectural profession, this project offers ample food for thought for developing new histories of architecture that, furthermore, might resonate with other recent investigations into twentieth-century architectural history beyond Europe. Even if some of the historical narratives introduced are somewhat less convincing and others might actually have been overlooked, the project forms an important invitation to keep pushing the boundaries of the discipline of architectural history.

Index by keyword : *Venice Architecture Biennale, American architecture, global expertise, bureaucracy*

Chronological index : *21st century*

Schlagwortindex : *Architekturbiennale Venedig, amerikanische Architektur, weltweite Kompetenz, Bürokratie*

Chronologischer Index : *21. Jahrhundert*

Indice de palabras clave : *Bienal de arquitectura de Venecia, arquitectura americana, experiencia global, burocracia*

Periodo : *siglo XXI*

Index de mots-clés : *Biennale d'architecture de Venise, architecture américaine, expertise mondiale, bureaucratie*

Index chronologique : *XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*

Parole chiave : *Biennale di architettura di Venezia, architettura americana, know-how globale, burocrazia*

Indice cronologico : *XXI secolo*